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Renaissance

Renaissance motifs were introduced into Devon by the generation preceding the Reformation with the earliest recorded work at Landcross in 1503 which would make it a very early date for its introduction into England.

Alternatively, the date could be 1552, if the carver's familiarity with Roman letters was as poor as it might have been, which would make it much less remarkable. Renaissance elements were sometimes married with Gothic forms with the result that bench ends

acquired a new diversity in their patterns. Renaissance imagery does not have the implied meaning of religious motifs. These new forms were purely decorative and secular and as such could have been intended to remove themselves from potential contemporary questions about images being perceived as idolatrous.

In the early 1500s the great period of church rebuilding was underway in Devon and Gothic features predominated when the Renaissance arrived. Some churches had already erected seats with Gothic design. This may be why few Devon parish churches have purely Renaissance elements in its seating. Lapford and Down St Mary, situated to the north of Crediton, have some good Renaissance work but they also retain their Gothic structures. Both place Renaissance images on shields that are situated between Gothic tracery at the top and foils at the base. This could be the work of the same carpenter. A century ago Miss Prideaux commented that if the shields were removed there would be no difference between these benches and those



from the Perpendicular period of the Gothic movement. Lapford, she wrote, has 'the characteristic union of these Renaissance details with purely Gothic forms and workmanship'.²²⁹ Likewise, the benches at Northlew use shields for the same purpose and this device can also be seen elsewhere such as at Sutcombe. In 1915 Miss Prideaux noted the carvings in that church and observed that the 'asp, amphisbena, dragons of all kinds, fish, hairy men, mermen, goats, serpents, a griffin and a sheep all figure in this motley array, besides grotesque human heads of surpassing hideousness arrayed in headdresses of equally exaggerated character'.²³⁰

The Renaissance figures are similar to the earlier misericord carvings of imaginary animals and as difficult to interpret. As long ago as 1125 St Bernard of Clairvaux asked:

*'What mean those ridiculous monstrosities in the courts of cloisters; those filthy apes, those fierce lions, those monstrous centaurs, those half-men, those spotted tigers, those fighting soldiers and horn-blowing hunters; many bodies under one head, or many heads on one body; here a serpent's tail attached to a quadruped, there a quadruped's head on a fish; here a beast presenting the foreparts of a horse, and dragging after it the rear of a goat; there a horned animal with the hind parts of a horse?'*²³¹

His question is equally applicable to the Renaissance carvings in Devon.

The carving at Newton St Petrock, between Holsworthy and Bideford, is similar but the joiner also discarded Gothic convention in other seats and filled his end panels solely with Renaissance design. He repeatedly carved variations of a creature that blended human, animal and foliage forms in unnatural combinations. This 'grotesque' was a feature common in Renaissance design but his creation had an eel-like body with tendrils that sprout forth out of his mouth. His long, thin delicate form swirls about the bench end and sometimes he, or possibly even she, is a bearded figure. Other Devon carvers provide a fuller body for their version of this Renaissance grotesque and some carving indicates scales or feathers. All are fanciful and unnatural creations with a lack of hostility. There is an elegance if not a slight sense of humour. These figures cannot be termed Christian and are seemingly as out of place in a church as the earlier Gothic gargoyles are to modern eyes. There is also a balance to the forms and many are symmetrical. Each appears to develop if not evolve in various permutations as they rise and wriggle from below. Miss Cresswell regarded one collection of these grotesques as 'a whole collection of creatures such as never went into the ark'. She also scoffed at the church guide which claimed one figure on a Tawstock bench end was a hunky-punk, an imaginary malevolent creature. In Miss Cresswell's opinion the carving was simply a typical Renaissance monster.²³²



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The Renaissance's other designs are equally inventive, flamboyant and nonsensical. There are full-bodied cupids, often wingless and generally nude, who occasionally play instruments. Stockleigh Pomeroy's cupids are particularly well fed in the face. Another feature of the Renaissance are Romaine Heads, the profiles of men and women presented within medallions. Some share a bench end and directly face one another with shapes coming out of their mouths reminiscent of medieval green men. These protrudences could be tendrils or might have indicated speech or music. At North Bovey one such man has beads pouring from his mouth. Many men have fantastic hats and often there are exaggerated beards. One at Sandford has what could be imagined to be a pipe in his mouth.

Sandford church has a number of striking portraits. Two have hair which could indicate they had African origins or equally that they were modelled on Bacchus. One young girl has pigtails. This is a substantial set of bench ends with a character of its own but like those of East Budleigh they refrained from the use of religious imagery.





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The carver ignored Gothic design except for geometric foliage: one lone bench end has Gothic tracery. The location of these bench ends in close proximity to Renaissance carving in the screens at Lapford and Morchard Bishop, as well as to the benches at Lapford and Down St Mary, raises questions as to whether workmen or patrons found the same inspiration.

Another figure that can be seen in a great number of churches is that of a male face set within foliage: Bideford, Clayhanger, Dowland, East Budleigh, High Bickington, Landcross, Newton St Petrock, Sandford and Westleigh have particularly good examples of this Leaf Head. He differs from the concept of the Green Man in that he does not have tendrils sprouting from any orifice.

The best example of a Leaf Head is on what is perhaps the best known single bench end carving in Devon. At East Budleigh one such figure is locally known as the Red Indian and has been identified as such by English Heritage.²³³ He has been branded a Native American because of the resident gentry family, the Raleighs. If the bench was carved at the same time as the Raleigh seat, 1534, then it would have been erected more than a full generation before Native Americans were known to have visited Devon. Its apparent feather headdress is revealed, on close inspection, to be leaves. The figure's prominent nose has also won over devotees to the American identification but little attention has ever been given to his leaf beard, a feature not common to early Americans.



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Transitional carvings from Gothic to Renaissance can be found across Devon but are particularly strong in North Devon. The complexity of deciphering design is aptly illustrated by the collection at Alwington, another church near Bideford. The benches which are in situ deploy Gothic design and these were probably built for the church. Others form bench front panels and backs as well as part of the reredos and pulpit but these are very different: they deploy a mixture of Gothic and Renaissance motifs. One



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explanation could be that these two sets of bench ends were carved at different periods but church records prove that bench ends were acquired from nearby Parkham church and these were used to embellish Alwington. Those which still serve as bench ends were original to the church while the others were part of this acquisition some two hundred years ago. Alwington's history is easily understood because the church records are detailed.²³⁴ It is impossible to understand so readily the histories of other churches because of the paucity of their written evidence.

Landcross, also in North Devon, has a collection with no parallels. It retains a limited use of Gothic tracery and geometric foliage. Like elsewhere there are portraits but there are two motifs which are unusual and



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one which will not be found outside the church. One of these curious designs, as discussed earlier, is on two separate bench ends. These depict individual figures, each squeezed within his or her own arch. They might be meant to be contortionists. A similar motif can be seen nearby at Abbotsham. The other interesting image is on two shields on one bench end. This seat has two angel-like figures with great batwings. Each is depicted as if made of string and their feet have tassels. One is at prayer.

Tawstock also has a small number of bench ends with delicately carved Renaissance design. Gothic Tracey is forgotten here. Their execution is similar to those from Parkham (but now at Alwington). Likewise there is a collection of panels with rich Renaissance carving which



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now forms the tower screen at Bideford. These have been suggested to have been the original bench ends from the church²³⁵ and if so would have made for incredible viewing. Many are portraits set within square frames and would appear to have been originally carved with some Gothic design. When James Davidson, the East Devon antiquarian,



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visited the church in 1848 he described the reader's desk as having the same style of carving.²³⁶ The tower screen may have originated from several sources.

Many churches have a mix of Gothic tracery, foliate and Renaissance designs but it is at Littleham near Bideford that Gothic elements have almost entirely disappeared.²³⁷ There is some transitional tracery using new motifs. The carving is a great leap forward from earlier designs: foliage creatures are part of the arcading as well as being the dominant focal points in many of the bench ends.

Miss Prideaux was one of the first to comment on the Renaissance influence on Devon's bench ends design. She noted of the aforementioned Lapford's carvings that they were semi-pagan but appreciated the beauty of the carving of the border of one end. In her opinion the freedom, vigour and grace expressed in the work was in each instance equally remarkable.²³⁸ Much the same could be said of one of the most surprising collections in Devon. Powderham Castle Chapel has eight bench ends thought to have been taken from South Huish Church. The carvings are among the most imaginative in Devon. Figures have exaggerated sleeves and hats but several have impossibly long necks to go with them. Alongside them are fantastic creatures as well as a pair of fighting cocks and below them a pair of dragons similarly engaged in battle.²³⁹ In 1841 James Davidson found ancient benches at South Huish but he described these as being 'carved in



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trefoil headed panels.'²⁴⁰ His description fails to capture the essence of the carved wood now at Powderham Castle and it may be that they originated from another church. They differ from those in the parish church at Powderham and the style of carving is also dissimilar to the Renaissance bench ends in North Devon's churches where there is a shared style in the motifs which are placed on shields within Gothic tracery. The Powderham benches, once located as they were possibly deep within the South Hams, were executed with different motifs. Unlike other Devon bench ends these divide the panel into two halves with two separate designs. The carving is not fine but has flair and elegance if not lightness to it. The lack of other Renaissance bench end carving in the South Hams poses the question of what there might have been in these other neighbouring churches.